

Will Stop at Nothing

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Ничего подобного: nothing of the sort

If my park is representative of Russia, the country is experiencing a boom in multiple births. The narrow paths are blocked by double strollers pushed by exhausted moms, as well-rested childless folks stop to peer in and argue about contemporary Russian usage. Они двойняшки или близнецы? (Are they fraternal or identical twins? Or is that: Are they identical or fraternal twins?)

In this, as in so many questions of modern usage, dictionaries are no help. They tell you that двойняшка (twin) is simply a colloquial term for близнец (twin). And sometimes that is true. You'll hear discussions about двойняшки и тройняшки (twins and triplets). But some people use the terms двойняшка и близнец to distinguish between fraternal and identical twins.

Right now, in my Moscow neighborhood, the current usage is двойняшки = fraternal twins and близнецы = identical twins.

Sometimes the curious neighbors avoid linguistic confusion. They peer in at the gurgling bundles of joy and announce: Они как две капли воды! (They're just like two drops of water, or two peas in a pod.)

If one of the kiddies looks like a parent, they might exclaim: Он просто вылитый папа! (literally, he's an exact mold of his father; he's the spitting image of his dad). Or they might say: Она вся в маму (she's just like her mother), although this can mean either in appearance or manner.

When a baby who can barely sit up makes goo-goo eyes at the women, his mother sighs: Он похож на меня, но весь в папу. Улыбается всем дамам. (He looks like me, but he takes after his father. He smiles at all the ladies.)

Russian lets you make a lot of distinctions between people or things that are exactly alike and those that are just similar. Одинаковый is the word for exactly alike. One baby-ogler opted out of our twin discussion because: По мне, все маленькие дети — одинаковые (For me, all babies look alike). Похожий, схожий and сходный are all a bit down on the identical scale and mean "very much alike." One philosophically minded novelist wrote: "Любовь схожа с бритвой: острая опасна, а тупая не нужна." (Love is like a razor: a sharp one is dangerous, but a dull one is no good at all).

Аналогичный (analogous) and подобный (similar) are another half-step down to "similar" or "in the same vein." When I lament a hard day of things going wrong, one of my friends uses the adverbial form of аналогичный: Тут аналогично (Ditto here). Подобный is often used at the end of a list when you run out of particulars: и тому подобное (etcetera). You might hear its emphatic negative form, ничего подобного! (nothing of the sort!).

And then there is the really cool three-letter word иже, which in Church Slavonic means который (which, who). Churchgoers know this from the first line of the Lord's Prayer: Отче наш, иже еси на небесех (Our Father, Who art in heaven). Today in modern Russian it is only used in one expression, иже с ним(и), which means "and other things/people like that." In many cases, this can be neatly translated by an English three-letter word, which is also virtually only used in one expression: ilk. Кто готов отдать жизнь за Абрамовича, Дерипаску и иже с ними? (Who is ready to give up his life for Abramovich, Deripaska and others of their ilk?)

Иже и ilk — как две капли воды!

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